DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 449 667 FL 026 563

AUTHOR Ghosn, Irma K.
TITLE Four Good Reasons To Use Literature in the Primary School ELT.
PUB DATE 1998-03-00
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of Teachers of English to Speakers of Other Languages (Seattle, WA, March 17-21, 1998).
PUB TYPE Opinion Papers (120) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Childrens Literature; *Classroom Techniques; Elementary Education; *English (Second Language); Foreign Countries; Multicultural Education; *Oral Language; Second Language Instruction; Second Language Learning; Thinking Skills; Vocabulary Development

ABSTRACT

This paper presents four arguments in favor of integrating literature into English as a foreign language (EFL) classes for grade school children, particularly in cases where academic language proficiency is the ultimate goal of instruction but where English exposure and use is limited to the classroom and school. The arguments include the following: (1) authentic literature provides a motivating, meaningful context for language learning, and it presents natural language at its finest, promoting vocabulary development in context; (2) literature stimulates oral language and involves the child with the text while exposing him or her to some aspect of the target language culture; (3) literature can promote academic literacy and critical thinking skills, and has the potential of fostering private interpersonal and intercultural attitudes; and (4) good literature deals with some aspects of the human condition and attempts to come to some understanding of life, either symbolically or metaphorically, and can thus also contribute to the emotional development of the child. (Contains 23 references.) (KFT)

Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made
from the original document.

ED 449 667

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION
CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Irma Ghosn
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Four Good Reasons to Use Literature in the Primary school ELT

Irma K. Ghosn

Introduction

The practice of teaching foreign languages, especially English, in the Primary school has been gaining global popularity. Several European countries are now introducing foreign language instruction in the upper Primary grades[1]. In some areas children are also expected to study at least some academic content in a foreign language[2]. I predict that the use of foreign language, English in particular, as an instructional language will be spreading as access to the electronic communications network is becoming available to ever widening circles of learners. The question is, to what extent the materials development has kept up with the changes in the goals of language instruction. Whether the aim is to provide exposure and enrichment or to prepare the child for the general curriculum delivered in the L2, the traditional structured materials may not be the most appropriate choice. In the first instance, they may not be motivating enough while in the latter case, they may prove to be too limited. On the other hand, materials developed for contexts where the target language is the community language and where learners have daily exposure to the target language and its culture may also prove problematic. They may assume certain levels of cultural awareness or availability of time and materials that are absent in the non-target language settings. Carefully selected children's literature, however, can provide a medium through which children can access the new language.

Children's literature is no stranger in North American or Australian ESL classes, where literary circles and a rich variety of reading response activities foster first and second language development and promote thinking skills. I will argue in this paper that the use of children's fiction has also a number of justifications in Primary school *EFL* instruction. This is especially the case in contexts where academic language proficiency

ED 026563

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

may be the goal of instruction, but where students' L2 exposure and use is limited to the classroom and school, such as is the case in Lebanon, for example.

Ten years ago, Collie and Slater (1987) noted that "many learners want and love literature", but, surprisingly, they went on to suggest that this is "awkward". I do not find it awkward at all; quite the contrary. The sustained human interest in 'storying' over centuries, even millennia, is clear from the rich evidence of the epics, myths, legends, and folk tales that have thrilled, inspired and entertained people since the times of Gilgamesh. One should actually wonder why literature has not been employed more in the language teaching classes, especially on the lower levels. (Of course, for many of the traditional grammar-translation classes at the secondary school level, literature has often been the only text for students, but perhaps rarely, if at all with the aim to generate personal interpretations of the author's meanings.) I will argue that authentic literature provides a motivating, meaningful context for language learning. Children are naturally drawn to stories, and literature presents natural language, language at its finest, and can thus foster vocabulary development in context. Literature also stimulates oral language and involves the child with the text while exposing him or her to some aspect of the target language culture, as Collie and Slater have pointed out. Furthermore, literature can promote academic literacy and critical thinking skills, and has the potential of fostering positive interpersonal and intercultural attitudes. Finally, good literature deals with some aspects of human condition, and attempts to come to some understanding of life, either symbolically or metaphorically (Vandergrift 1990), and can thus also contribute to the emotional development of the child.

Motivation

First, children's fiction, with its primarily narrative form, responds to the human need for narrative. Bernice Cullinan (1992) has suggested that narrative will provide a natural framework for language and remembering and will help develop schemata This is perhaps because, as Hardy (1978) has pointed out, our life is very much organized in narrative. Story, which should be central to a first language program, is therefore equally justified in an ELT program.

Four good reasons

Bruno Bettelheim (1986:4) recognized the significance that reading material has for the developing child and the way the child learns to understand the world and him/herself. If reading material is "so shallow in substance that little of significance can be gained", reading "becomes devalued when what one has learned to read adds nothing of importance to one's life". Although Bettelheim's remarks do not refer to L2 learners, one can draw an analogy between L1 reading material and the language used in an L2 class. One need only to substitute the word 'language' for 'reading' in Bettelheim's statement to understand its significance in ELT instruction. Exton and O'Rourke (1993:27-28) have expressed a similar concern in ESL context; reading and language activities generated by the typical basal reader texts fail to offer readers any satisfaction and may actually foster a notion that "reading and perhaps language in general involves the expenditure of effort upon texts that give back neither pleasure nor information in return". In the ELT class, this may mean that the learners will see the new language in this light.[3]

A delightful anecdotal description of one EFL teacher's experience with real children's books is presented by Ludmila Machura (1991) from Hungary. Although she does not provide data about the language achievement of her students, she does describe the obviously high motivational level of the learners. Her 'advanced 12-year-olds' enthusiastically worked through Eric Carle's (1974) *Very Hungry Caterpillar* (a picture storybook for young children). This says a lot about the power of literature. Another successful example with the same story in a Kindergarten EFL class of 4 year-olds in Lebanon is described by Ghosn (1977).

Language learning

Judging from the scores of books and articles in professional journals, children's literature has found a permanent place in the Whole Language classrooms both in first language and ESL settings. That is easy to understand bearing in mind that literature is not only interesting to children, but it facilitates integration of the language skills, it can offer predictable, yet natural language which promotes word recognition, offers

opportunities for authentic reading and writing tasks, and is not grammatically sequenced. (criteria identified for good whole language materials by Spiegel 1989)

Margaret Meek (1995:6) makes an excellent point in noting that "Stories teach children the verb tenses of the past and the future when they are intensely preoccupied with the present". Yet most of the Primary level ELT texts have overlooked this fact and keep to the simple present, even re-telling simplified classic folk tales and fairy tales in the simple present. David Crystal (1987) strongly argues against this emphasis on simple present tense - a form of communication he sees unnatural except in sports commentary. It would seem to me that stories, with their often familiar story grammars, would provide an ideal context for verb tense acquisition. Literature may also lead to L2 learner's "internalizing the language" (Enkvist 1986:8) as it provides "a short-cut to the extensive experience of linguistic items in context that native speakers acquire by direct exposure", and it provides "genuine language context and a focal point for students in their own efforts to communicate".

Literature is full of examples of real-life language in different situations as Hill (1986:11) has pointed out, and offers a variety of models for written communication. In contrast, traditional ELT course books have been criticized as being "stiff imitations of the dynamic spontaneity of real life"; their characters as "nice, decent, and characterless"; and the situations "generally unreal and dull" (Crystal 1987:15).

Another significant point in favor of literature is, as Bassnett and Grundy (1993:7) have pointed out, that

> *literature is a high point of language usage; arguably it marks the greatest skills a language user can demonstrate. Anyone who wants to acquire a profound knowledge of language that goes beyond the utilitarian will read literary texts in that language.*

Why should we retain the young ELT learners at a purely 'utilitarian' level? If the aim of language instruction is enrichment and positive attitude towards the target culture, 'utilitarian' is hardly the way to go, and if the goal is access to L2 academic material, 'utilitarian' will also fall short. The young language learners' reading materials must also provide an opportunity for deepening their knowledge of forms of written language, and

the study of the writer's craft in quality stories can raise students' awareness of what language can do. It is difficult to imagine that drilling irregular verbs or doing transformation exercises of verb tenses would be very meaningful or motivating for average 8-10 year olds, or add anything meaningful to their knowledge of language. However, to analyze the vocabulary or grammar in the context of a captivating story or a poem in order to make sense of the meaning the author is trying to convey may well be much more interesting.[4]

Reading strategies (prediction, use of context clues, etc.), I will argue, can be taught better through stories than the structured ELT texts - an important point since, as Exton and O'Rourke point out, learning a language and learning to read are *not* one and the same thing.

Furthermore, the excitement offered by a good story is likely to generate much more pupil talk than the often rather artificial language texts. Enthusiastic pupil talk will result in more opportunities for receiving feedback and for negotiating of meaning.

Academic Literacy [5]

The teaching of subject matter through the medium of a second language has become a fact in many countries, but for different reasons. [6] ELT learners who are expected to study some or all of the academic content in English will need to develop more than interpersonal communication skills and basic reading comprehension strategies.

Developing second language literacy is facilitated by 1st language literacy, says Cummins (1981), and Krashen (1997:21) has pointed out that "To become good readers in the second language children need to read in the primary language". However, studies that Krashen cites have shown that children in less developed countries are at a disadvantage compared to children in developed countries in terms of access to print and books. (Children's books are often at the bottom of the list of publishers' priorities, even in the developed countries, where, historically, times of economic hardship have usually witnessed a decrease in publication for children.) Thus these already disadvantaged

children may have little, if any, opportunity to read for pleasure in their first language, and the transmission-oriented, rote-learning approach to instruction still prevailing in many countries (despite all what we know about learning!) does not help develop reading strategies in the 1st language that might transfer to the 2nd language. Consequently, children may be ill prepared for the academic literacy required for success in the general curriculum. This may lead to early dropping out of school in areas where no compulsory education exists.[7] The ELT program can help bridge the gap in the developing countries through a syllabus that includes a rich selection of authentic high quality children's literature in English, complemented with spin-off language development activities. Ideally, some of the literature will feature content familiar to the learners[8] thus making the new language easier to learn.

Academic literacy requires also critical thinking skills, and literature offers a natural medium through which students can be introduced to the type of thinking and reasoning expected in academic classes - e.g. looking for main points and supporting details, comparing and contrasting, looking for cause-effect relationships, judging and evaluating evidence - and the type of language needed to express the thinking. Good literature is also often highly generative, allowing the teacher to expand the themes while making use of the new language in different contexts and accommodating to student needs and interests.

Literature as a change Agent

One more compelling reason for using literature in a language class is the potential power of good literature to transform, to change attitudes, and to help eradicate prejudice while fostering empathy, tolerance and an awareness of global problems. The power of literature in developing empathy and tolerance is well documented in research on multicultural literature and peace education, but the possibilities have not been exploited in ELT programs. Yet, EFL learners around the world have the great potential of becoming the much-needed bridge-builders across cultures.

Four good reasons

Literature, as Bettelheim has pointed out, can promote the gradual development of the understanding of self and the world. With this comes insight into behaviors and feelings of others, necessary for empathy, tolerance and conflict resolution. Children's stories present conflict in ways that are easy for children to identify with and that enable them to empathize with the characters experiencing conflicts and difficulties. Discussions about the story conflict can provide children with an opportunity to discover their own solutions, thus developing the skills and insights they will need when dealing with conflict themselves (Schomberg 1993).

Multicultural literature has long since become a staple in ESL classes and a rich variety exists of folk tales and ethnic-interest stories, suitable especially for the North American context. However, if children learning a foreign language are to gain insight into the target language culture, they should read high quality *contemporary* fiction which shows the characters in contexts that accurately reflect the culture of the English speaking world today (or the world Englishes!). Folk tales should be used with caution, if the aim is cultural awareness. If carefully chosen and skillfully exploited, they can reveal something about the cultural values and traditions that still prevail in the country of origin; however, if treated superficially, may leave the young reader with impressions that do not reflect reality and, what is worse, with impressions of 'funny', 'weird', or even 'dumb'.[9]

I would include in intercultural learning also the awareness and familiarity with the 'culture of nature', which is usually ignored in the ELT texts, with a token animal article or pollution item here and there. In contrast, children's literature provides a rich variety of texts for this purpose. Eric Carle's books about various animals, for example, are invaluable for the lower grades. First, they are very appealing to children in their approach. Second, the use of rich and natural, yet repetitious and predictable language is ideal for language learning. Finally, these stories are all highly generative in terms of thematic development. Another author whose works are well suited for Primary school language classes, and who has included aspects of nature in her stories is Pat Hutchins.

Finally, quality literature can be used to provide vicarious experiences that foster development of emotional intelligence defined by Goleman (1995), essential for empathy and tolerance. Emotional intelligence, says Goleman (1997:6), is "Knowing what your feelings are and using your feelings to make good decisions in life", and "... remaining hopeful and optimistic when you have setbacks..", and "It's empathy; knowing what the people around you are feeling." (ibid). According to Goleman, emotional intelligence is learned through experience and interaction with others. He argues that "... repeated emotional lessons of a child's life literally shape the brain circuits for that response" (9). Empathy, for example, can become a life long skill through appropriate learning experiences. Child development and psychology of learning research has shown that vicarious experiences can promote learning. High quality literature would seem to have the potential to provide, albeit vicariously, the much-needed experiences that will promote emotional intelligence. It can help the child understand self and others better; it demonstrates that there is always hope, and that one can overcome even seemingly insurmountable obstacles; it can foster development of empathy and tolerance.[10] In the developing countries, where high quality L1 literature may not be available or easily accessible to all children, the ELT program can provide the much needed literary experiences which can be related to learners' own life experience and reality. Examples of titles in this category that have strong potential for language classes, include the now classic titles: *Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad* Day (Viorst 1972);The *Crow Boy* (Yashima 1965); *William's Doll* (Zolotov 1972); *The Something* (Babbitt 1970) and The *Hundred Dresses* (Estes 1944), just to mention a few. The 1998 Mary Finocchiaro Award-winning *Caring Kids* (Ghosn 1999) is an example of literature written with a second language learner in mind.

In the increasingly global world, language and critical thinking skills, intercultural awareness and emotional intelligence would seem to be high priorities, especially in our struggle to create a more just and peaceful world. I have made many assumptions above, some based on first language and ESL experiences and some on research evidence, but what I believe is needed is extensive research into the realities of the Primary school ELT

classrooms around the world. One question that should be addressed, is how we can assure that young language learners will be able to develop competencies they need in the new language while preserving the legitimacy and value of their native language. [11]Literature may provide some interesting possibilities in this regard, too.

Notes

[1] For example, Finland and Austria

[2] Lebanon, for example, has implemented this practice since the 1940's

[3] This is vividly illustrated by the frustrations expressed by a Middle School EFL teacher in South Lebanon; the adolescent male students in her class, located very close to the occupied territory, did not find the readings in the assigned text book in any way relevant to their daily concerns. Quite the contrary, they found both the content and the language functions trivial in light of their experiences and future plans.

[4] An example of a 'different' grammar lesson can be found in Ghosn, Irma (1997) *Grammar with Louis Carroll?* Modern English Teacher.

[5] Academic literacy here refers to the academic reading, writing and thinking skills required for success in the general curriculum

[6] Kenya - political reasons; Lebanon - socio-cultural/ economic reasons; Europe - communication/ movement; International schools - mobility

[7] For example, in Lebanon, the drop out rate in the Primary and Middle School population is around 35-40 % depending on the source of the data (Ghosn 1998). Needless to say, the curriculum is not the sole reason for the drop out rates; economic hardship is a major contributing factor that drives the youth to employment in Lebanon.

[8] An example of this is 'The Caring Kids' (Ghosn 1998) series set in the Middle Eastern context and featuring local topics linked to global issues and themes.

[9] A typical example of this can be found in Anita Stern's (1994) World Folktales *,Giant's Bride*

[10] For more on this, see Sutherland, Bettelheim, and Pinsent.

References:

Babbit, Natalie (1970) The Something

Bassnett, Susan and Peter Grundy (1993) Language through literature London:Longman

Bettelheim, Bruno (1986) The Uses of Enchantment

Collie, Joanne and Stephen Slater (1987) Literature in the Language Classroom: A Resource book of ideas and activites Cambridge U.P.

Cullinan, Bernice E. (1992) *Whole language and children's literature* Language Arts, Vol. 69:6

Crystal, David (1987) Child Language, Learning and Linguistics. London: Edward Arnold

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Estes, Eleanor (1944) The Hundred Dresses

Exton, Gill and Pat O'Rourke (1993) *KAL and 'real' books/ Reading schemes* Reading , July, 27-29

Ghosn, Irma (1997) *ESL with children's literature:The way whole language worked in one Kindergarten class.* The English Teching FORUM Vol. 35:3 , 14-19(29)

Ghosn, Irma (1998) Unpublished raw research data

Ghosn, Irma (1999) Caring Kids: Towards a just and peaceful society with children's literature. Beirut: Dar El-Ilm Al-Malayin

Goleman, Daniel (1995) Emotional Intelligence. New York: Bantam Books

Hardy, B (1978) *Narrative as the primary act of mind* in Meek, M., A.Warlow, G.Barton, eds. The Cool Web: The Pattern of Children's Reading New York: Atheneum

Hill, Jennifer (1986) Using Literature in Language Teaching London:MacMillan

Krashen, Stepehn (1997/98) *Bridging Inequity with Books* Educational Leadership, Vol.55:4, 18-22

Machura, Ludmila (1995) *Using literature in* language *teaching* in Brumfit, Christopher, Jayne Moon and Ray Tongue, eds. Teaching English to Children: From practice to principle. Harlow, Essex:Longman Group

Meek, Margaret (1995) *The Critical Challenge of the World in Books for Children* Children's Literature in Education, Vol. 26:1 (5-22)

Viorst , Judith (1972) Alexander and the Terrible, Horrible, No Good, Very Bad Day

Schomberg, J. (1993) *Messages of Peace* Book Links, 3:1, 9-11

Sutherland, Zena and May Hill Arbuthnot (1991) 8th Ed. Children and Books. New York:Harper Collins

Vandergrift, Kay (1990) Teaching Children's Literature

Yashima, Taro (1965) The Crow Boy

Zolotov, Charlotte (1972) William's Doll